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ABSTRACT

Noting that although learning disabled (LD) students are attending college in increasing numbers there are few specific course strategies for helping these students (except for adaptations of existing programs and emphasis on elementary or secondary students), this paper reviews resources on a variety of topics as they relate to LD students. Among the materials discussed are those relating to (1) definitions and diagnosis of LD, (2) specific difficulties in English classes, (3) specific skill deficits of LD writers, (4) effective nontraditional teaching methods, (5) campus-wide support systems, (6) compensatory learning strategies, (7) error analysis in assessing writing, (8) the process approach to writing instruction; (9) teaching literature, and (10) teaching reading. The paper concludes that future literature on LD students should describe successful teaching methods and course content in English instruction, and should investigate how the use of techniques that were successful with mainstreamed elementary and high school students have worked when applied to college students. (SRT)

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Teaching English to the LD College Student: A Research Survey

Gerald Siegel

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Teaching English to the LD College Student: A Research Survey

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Over the past decade or so, increasing numbers of learning disabled students have attempted higher education as a result of both legislation and changes in the treatment of these students by school systems. An examination of the literature in 1982 (Siegel 54-62) revealed few specific course strategies for helping these students.

A partial survey of more recent studies reveals a continuation of earlier trends: adaptations of existing programs for LD students and emphasis on elementary or secondary students.

One of the most useful resources for any teacher of the learning disabled is Scheiber and Talpers' Campus Access for Learning Disabled Students: A Comprehensive Guide, which contains sections on a variety of topics such as definition and diagnosis of LD, compensation strategies, and deciding upon a school. Treatments are brief and pointed; extensive bibliographies are included for readers who wish to go further into selected topics.

A number of books and articles catalog typical LD student behavior patterns and learning styles. Among these are an overview in Scheiber and Talpers (18-25) and a convenient checklist available in Hartman and Krulwich (2). In addition, information is available in a number of general works on learning disability and as part of the literature review in much LD scholarship.

Seitz and Scheerer (19-20) isolate certain areas of particular difficulty for the LD college student in an English class: listening, reading, copying, taking notes, expressing knowledge in writing, and

remembering information under pressure (as on tests). Vogel (523-26) agrees and discusses two particular areas in greater depth. She mentions in particular not only listening problems, but general auditory language difficulties (documented by a number of studies). She also characterizes some specific skill deficits of LD writers--especially punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.

In a study of 33 nontraditional LD students, Buchanan and Wolf (34-38) found many characteristics usually associated with learning disabled children. Of more concern to college English teachers is the fact that these students seemed unable to determine their own strengths and weaknesses, or to understand "the nature of their learning disabilities and how these disabilities were affecting their lives" (38).

A general concern throughout the literature is the limited value for an LD student of the traditional lecture. Multiple modalities of various sorts are suggested instead.

Schmidt (8) lists specific methods available to any teacher seeking alternatives to standard "textbook centered lecture courses." Among the suggestions: using discussion rather than straight lecture; encouraging oral presentations instead of term papers; and relying upon taped books and on note-takers or tape recorders for class notes. Garrett agrees on the limits of the lecture, but offers suggestions if some form of lecture is used. Most important is careful organization of the lesson into an easy-to-follow format; he also suggests previewing the information to be covered before actually teaching it and using vocal emphasis and repetition to stress major points, employing deductive (rather than inductive) structure, and relying upon concrete, specific examples (11-12).

Seitz and Scheerer suggest (27) other alternatives to the straight lecture: student presentations, group and team work, or reading directions and literature aloud. They also recommend "cuing and preorganization," such as using transitions in talking to focus on important items, providing lecture outlines in advance, putting outlines or key words on the board, and providing study outlines before tests (26). Finally, they suggest (29) flexibility in testing approaches and care in preparing clear tests.

Herum (13-19) agrees on the importance of a detailed syllabus, but goes even further by using varied page layouts to create a highly readable format. From a learning disabled student who sat in on a class, he learned about the impact of minor physical distractions: such a student could be bothered if Herum's voice dropped excessively, if his handwriting on the board was too small, or if he allowed sunlight to hamper the board's visibility.

Beck calls for reinforcement whenever possible (for example, by repeating "point-by-point directions about assignments" even if the assignment has already been presented to the class and explained) and for a supportive attitude (17). Many students, by the time they reach college, will already have developed their own compensatory strategies; these students should be encouraged. Others can achieve at satisfactory levels if they are helped to learn to compensate.

For a fortunate few students, a campus wide support system may exist and need only be publicized, as at Central Washington University, where students have available readers and taped texts, alternate testing approaches, and tutoring and study skills instruction (Clyde-Snyder 6). Most situations, however, will require effort by the individual

instructor. Meyers, for example, offers (453-61) a case study of one student about to graduate who improved both coursework and attitudes through tutoring by the author that sought to uncover compensation strategies.

Vogel (523-26) suggests compensatory strategies in four areas: note-taking, punctuation, reading, and test-taking. She warns that students who choose to tape lectures may need the aid of an LD specialist to overcome auditory skill shortcomings. Simpler procedures include having a non-disabled student duplicate his or her notes or obtaining special help in outlining, organizing, and summarizing. Sentence combining exercises may help with punctuation problems. Taped materials can be used to overcome reading problems, but (again, because of the possibility of auditory deficits), this approach should be alternated with supporting activities such as preparing lists of key phrases, paraphrases of main ideas, or summary paragraphs. Vogel also cites a number of test-taking alternatives.

Most of the available literature related to the classroom teaching of English centers on writing. In part, this focus may result from current interest in process approaches to writing--approaches which, because they require task analysis, are well adapted to the LD writer.

One of the most useful studies of the LD writer (Gregg, "The College Learning Disabled Writer" 334-37) emphasizes the importance of error analysis in assessing the LD writer and compares error patterns of normal, basic, and learning disabled writers. Unlike basic writers, LD students need not only practice in using style and grammar, but also help in gaining an awareness of how language works. Two instructional alternatives seem appropriate: "guided composition" and "sentence

combining." Giving students "prewritten material" to manipulate in specific ways has been shown effective for both normal and basic writers and may work for LD writers. Sentence combining can aid such difficulties as dropped endings, use of "non-grammatical guiding cues," and punctuation (336-37).

Beck advises (17) a "process-oriented, step-by-step" approach to material which allows student and instructor together to first isolate and then develop coping strategies for writing problems. Not all of this work must be individual; students with the same problems can work together. Cole and Guiterrez, who also suggest that students with writing problems need to recognize those problems before solving them, used a series of writing topics encouraging exploration of writing patterns and problems as both subject matter and as a means of finding problems. After the difficulty was located, "an intervention" could be developed to "resolve the problem" (262-69).

Along with the process approach, the computer and word processing offer help to college teachers of LD writers. In one case study, Arms (39-41) describes the methods she used to help a severely dyslexic student in a technical writing class overcome, through use of word processing, conferences, and a student editor, obstacles to effective composing.

Hummel (559-61) reviews studies of word processing and word processing software, emphasizing references relevant for teachers of the learning disabled, cautioning about using word processing, and warning of limitations of spelling checkers. He describes several broad studies of writing activity software and concludes with a review of QUILL (a set of writing activities) and THE SENSIBLE SPELLER (a spelling checker).

For some, simple transcribing may be an alternative that uses process, but avoids word processing. In a case study, Myers describes how, in tutoring sessions, she encouraged a student to concentrate on ideas, not mechanics. Eventually, the student's "sentence structure, vocabulary, and syntax improved tremendously" (459). Watson (642-45) reports similar results in a case in which student and teacher worked on both reading and writing. The student progressed from unedited writing in a journal to using "editing strategies." Student and teacher moved on to writing together (student dictating, instructor transcribing); later, the instructor helped with editing. As the student grew used to writing as a process, "revision and editing emerged gradually and naturally." These findings corroborate the judgment of Gregg, who, as the result of one study of comparative LD/basic writer error patterns ("A Comparison of the Written Language Mechanical Error Patterns of College Learning Disabled, Normal, and Basic Writers" 17-18), stressed the importance of error detection as well as remediation and urged teachers to work with students during the rewriting process.

Herum suggests teacher involvement in the classroom rather than on an individual basis out of class and describes how he brought a particular "scissors and tape" revision exercise into the classroom for everyone after finding that LD students had difficulty with some mechanical aspects of the drill (15-18). Zink (14-18) describes a variety of reinforcement techniques (in particular, diagramming sentences) he used in a junior-level grammar course.

Spelling problems may result from specific difficulties in a number of areas: writing, listening, reading, or sequential memory, for example (McKernan 11). In a chiefly theoretical discussion, Bookman examines

error analysis of LD spellers, observing that these students may need special help in moving toward standard spelling-- for example, with learning to do their own error analysis. She suggests emphasizing the predictability, not the exceptions, of English spelling; this approach involves going "beyond sound-letter correspondence" and showing "all possible sources of knowledge--phonics, phonics rules, word structure information, mnemonic devices, and analogy" (27-31).

McKernan recommends some similar approaches in her description of the spelling program used at Central Washington University as part of the HELDS project (12-18). The materials used in the program are the Eidos Spelling Program, Spelling Techniques ("a tactile kinesthetic spelling program"), and The Mechanics of Spelling ("a seven module casette tape series" used to provide "an auditory method"). Adaptations are made in using these materials with LD students. McKernan also describes a number of reinforcement strategies.

Apart from literature designed for specialized teachers of reading, studies of the teaching of literature to the learning disabled in college are limited. One study of story recall (Worden, Malmgren, and Gabourie 145-52) found that LD adults improved recall of a story more with simple repetition (three readings) than they did through instruction in prose analysis. For the learning disabled, then , simple repetition may be a useful technique for overcoming characteristic long-term memory loss.

A second study (Worden and Nakamura 633-40) compared recall skills of LD and normal learners on narrative prose materials and concluded that the value of repetition to learning disabled students "may be limited to . . . gist recall; performance on other tasks such as understanding instructions, summarizing, and answering multiple choice questions will

not necessarily be improved by this method."

Watson (642-45) describes an approach to reading that encouraged error identification and remediation. The student began by reading alone; he underlined any trouble spots in the reading assignments and just continued. Then, at their joint sessions, he and the teacher examined the trouble spots and devised strategies for handling the concepts involved.

Finally, Garrett (16-21) achieved results in a speech class that mirror those of writing and literature classes in which LD students participate. He found that using small discussion groups to try to develop answers to some of the students' study questions worked well, allowing the LD students to benefit from peer instruction. He used diagrams to clarify text concepts and encouraged projects other than term papers or standard tests as means of evaluation. And he used a variety of adaptations of normal materials and approaches.

In brief, some progress is being made toward helping the classroom college teacher meet the needs of learning disabled students, but much remains to be done. Future research is needed in three areas: continued and expanded description of methods that work as part of individualized teacher-student efforts; specific accounts of content and teaching practices used by the English teacher in the classroom at schools of all kinds--particularly at schools specializing in helping the learning disabled; and investigations of attempts to use at the college and university level the techniques found successful with mainstreamed elementary and high school LD students.

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